

The Small *Ranunculus Hecatera dysodea* (D.& S.) (Lep.: Noctuidae): A new moth for the Middlesex Vice-County and a new larval foodplant

The return of this species to Britain, ending its presumed extinction, was summarised by Agassiz and Spice (1998. *Ent. Rec.* **110**: 229-232). Although the moth was at that time (1997 and 1998), apparently confined to a very small area of West Kent near to London, it seemed logical to assume that it would eventually spread along the River Thames on both the southern and northern banks. I was therefore pleased, though not especially surprised, to discover a number of second instar larvae on the flowering head of a prickly lettuce plant *Lactuca serriola* at a disused wharf on the northern bank of the Thames on the Isle of Dogs, Middlesex, on 17 July 2000. Adults were bred through to confirm the identification and a single adult male was found in a malaise trap sample from the same site (trap operated from 17 July to 20 August 2000).

A few days later, on 24 July 2000, at a site in Twickenham, towards the western side of Middlesex, three small larvae resembling the early instars *H. dysodea* were discovered on the flowering head of an isolated plant of bristly ox-tongue *Picris echioides*. No plants of *Lactuca* were growing within any reasonable distance of this plant and, in spite of searching, only these three larvae could be found. Although the similarity in physical structure of the flowering heads of *Lactuca serriola* and *Picris echioides* is remarkably high, it was considered rather unlikely that the larvae would prove to be *H. dysodea*. Nevertheless, they were taken home and supplied with their original foodplant until pupation; a few weeks afterwards, one adult *H. dysodea* emerged (it is assumed that the other two failed to pupate as their remains could not be found in the compost). This would appear to be a completely new foodplant record for this species.

Although Heath and Emmet (1979. *Moths and Butterflies of Great Britain and Ireland*, **9**: 227) refer to the moths and larvae as being "locally common . . . around London . . ." up to about 1895, a complete review of London records (Plant, 1993. *Larger Moths of the London Area*. LNHS) reveals that the moth has never before been recorded in Middlesex (VC 21).

The moth has now also been recorded in Essex. Don Down reported larvae at East Tilbury during 1999 (*Atropos* No. 9: 84) whilst more recently Ian Kimber took an adult at Boscombe Avenue, Grays on the night of 12 August 2000. I am grateful to Ian for permission to mention his record in this note. These are the first Essex records since 1918. Further round the coast, a single adult was taken at light at Landguard Bird Observatory, Suffolk on 16 June [1999?] (*Atropos* No. 9: 71).

There can be no doubt that this species is set to spread further along the Thames, both eastwards into Kent and Essex and westwards past London. Quite what significance can be attached to the switch to a new foodplant is unclear at present, but it is obviously worth looking for larvae on *P. echioides* and possibly other related plant species. As a species whose re-appearance in Britain is well-documented, detailed monitoring of its spread is clearly possible. All new sightings should be reported to the appropriate county moth recorder.— COLIN W. PLANT, 14 West Road, Bishops Stortford, Hertfordshire CM23 3QP (E-mail: Colinwplant@compuserve.com).